

Draft Refuge plan available for public comment

by Robin West

There is an old saying, “People don’t plan to fail; they fail to plan.” Personally I find formal planning exercises a bit tedious—always rich in process and sometimes poor in product. I do recognize the truth of another old saying however: “If you don’t know where you are going, any old path will get you there.” Without well-established plans there is a tendency for people (and agencies or organizations) to wander. Congress recognized this when they passed legislation in 1997 that required all national wildlife refuges in the Nation (currently 548) to complete comprehensive conservation plans every 15 years.

Kenai National Wildlife Refuge completed its first comprehensive conservation plan in 1985 (a requirement of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980). With the new legislative requirement, as well as the old plan clearly becoming dated, the Refuge initiated revision to the plan over five years ago, and in May of this year released a draft for public review and comment.

Comprehensive conservation plans are a bit of a misnomer. They are broad “umbrella” documents that generally cover all aspects of refuge management. They are not so detailed, however, that the day-to-day (comprehensive) management details are provided. They lay out goals and objectives to ensure the purposes for which the refuge was established are being fulfilled. They also ensure national policy is being incorporated, that reasonable consistency is being employed in management decision-making, and that uses proposed to be continued or initiated are compatible with refuge purposes and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The planning process also allows for a range of alternatives to be evaluated for issues important to the public with each possible option being required to be consistent with laws, regulations, policies, and the goals and objectives of the plan.

The groups of issues, and range of alternatives, frequently draw the most attention in the public review and comment process. The issues included in the Kenai draft plan were generated by the public in a scoping exercise that kicked off the current planning process. In general, these issues fell into five categories: 1) How will the Refuge address large-scale

habitat changes and the use of fire? 2) How will the Refuge manage existing facilities for public use while ensuring natural resource protection? 3) How will the Refuge enhance wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities? 4) How will the Refuge manage increasing public use to ensure protection of resources and visitor experience? 5) How will the Refuge balance motorized access with protection of resources and visitor experience?

While there are many aspects to the five issues above, I believe the major components of the issues, as addressed by the draft plan proposed preferred alternatives, are best summarized as follows. Issue 1 proposes to maximize the use of fire for resource benefits where it makes sense to do so. Issue 2 addresses general long-term management of current industrialized areas and proposes to eventually (after oil and gas activity ceases) to develop Swanson River Oil Field for public access and restore Beaver Creek Oil Field for wildlife habitat values. It also addresses options for the Mystery Creek (ENSTAR Natural Gas Pipeline) corridor. Issue 3 proposes to legalize the personal use of reasonable amounts of natural resources (shed antlers and edible plants). Issue 4 looks at crowding concerns, particularly on the Upper Kenai River and the area immediately below Skilak Lake. It proposes camping restrictions, additional limits on commercial operators, and a mechanism to restrict general public use should use levels rise to where it becomes difficult for people to find a place to fish. Finally, Issue 5 evaluates aircraft and snow machine access and proposes to increase aircraft landing opportunities in the Chickaloon Bay area.

To review the alternatives in detail, people can come by the Refuge headquarters in Soldotna and pick up a CD of the entire plan, or a printed summary. Additionally, copies can be requested by mail, email, or phone by contacting: Rob Campellone, Planning Team Leader; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 1011 E. Tudor Road, MS-231; Anchorage, AK 99503; Phone (907) 786-3982; email fw7_kenai_planning@fws.gov. The draft plan may also be viewed on-line at: <http://www.r7.fws.gov/nwr/planning/plans.htm>

Comments are due to the Planning Team Leader at

the above address by September 1, 2008. The Refuge is also scheduling several public open house meetings to help facilitate public comment gathering. The first meeting will be held 5 to 8pm at the Kenai River Center in Soldotna on Friday August 1, followed by a meeting 4:30 to 7:30pm at the Islands and Oceans Visitor Center in Homer on Monday August 4, and 4:30 to 7:30pm in the Gordon Watson Conference Room (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Regional Office) 1011 East Tudor Road in Anchorage Tuesday August 5.

Everyone who has interest in Kenai National Wildlife Refuge management is encouraged to review

the draft revised comprehensive conservation plan and provide comments. Reviewers are welcome to address any issue of interest, whether it is currently captured to their liking in the draft plan or not. All substantial comments will be addressed in the final plan, and after any necessary re-writes, it is our hope to have a final plan completed early to mid-2009.

Robin West has worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska for nearly 30 years and has been manager of Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 1995. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.